



# Buffalo Tales



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e-mail: [bchs@kearney.net](mailto:bchs@kearney.net)

website: [bchs.kearney.net](http://bchs.kearney.net)

## Historic Homes of Ravenna

### The Cass House

by Valerie Vierk

#### Historic Homes of Ravenna—The Cass House

This historic home, now owned by Don and Vicki Schmidt, is located at 703 Grand Ave. It was built for over a period of two-three years, circa 1905-1907 by local carpenter, Joseph Hach, for the owner, Joseph Simon. The Buffalo County Assessor's office lists the date as 1910, which is evidently a later filing date. He bought the land from Erastus Smith, founder of Ravenna, in January 1906. Mr. Smith had purchased the land from the Union Pacific Railway Company in 1880. The house appears in a picture that was taken from Brickyard Hill north of town in 1908.

The house is of the Victoria Queen Anne design as seen by the spires on the little dormer on the west and on the rounded turret part of the roof. The decorative railings on the porch and balcony also suggest this. There was also a small balcony with railings off the three south windows on the third floor. What appears to be decorative tin ridge covers extended down from the peaks of the dormer and turret in the original pictures.

The photo was printed in the 50th anniversary of the town edition of the *Ravenna News* published in October, 1936.

Joseph Simon was born in the Bohemian village of Podecel in 1858. When he was eleven years old his family came to America and eventually settled in Chicago. At the time of the Great Chicago Fire the Simons were living only five blocks from the O'Leary barn, and Joseph and his father ran down to help fight the fire. In the fall of 1888 Joseph moved to Ravenna. He investigated several businesses and bought the Kasper Saloon, but traded it a few months later for a stock of merchandise. In an article written by Edith Abraham of Ravenna entitled



(1909)

## WITH THE SOCIETY

A Note from the President:

We are enjoying my favorite season of the year—cooler weather, football and some traveling. Roberta and I just spent a week on a cruise to Alaska. After a few days at home we spent ten days in Texas.

The Historical Society wants to thank the City Council and Wendell Wessel, Director of Finance, for approving Keno funds in the amount of \$3,565 for painting the Depot. Now the Depot has a new coat of paint and new shingles all done this summer.

The gazebo is nearing completion and is looking great. Thanks to a lot of volunteer hours and donations.

This past month the Trails and Rails Museum received a sizeable gift from the Estate of Dellores Nolte. We are most grateful to her for naming the Museum in her bequest.

—Larry Nansel, President

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"Czechs In and Around Ravenna," published in *Buffalo Tales*, Mr. Simon is listed as a businessman in Ravenna in 1893. He was engaged in this dry goods and grocery enterprise with his brother-in-law, F.J. Benesh, until 1895 when they liquidated the business. Then he took the job of marshal and street commissioner for ten years. Later he was engaged as a hog buyer and livestock feeder.

Mr. and Mrs. Simon adopted two children, Mary and George. Proof of the kindly nature of the adoptive parents is attested to in an article in the local paper, March 1905. About two years before, the Simons read in a *Bohemian* newspaper in Chicago a "sad and pathetic account" about the death of a mother and father within a week, leaving two orphans, aged five and three. Mr. Simon immediately contacted the relatives in Chicago, but they were only willing to let the oldest child, Mary, be adopted. Simon went to Chicago and picked up the little girl, but in the ensuing months she continued to grieve for her little brother. Finally, two years later, the relatives allowed the little brother to be adopted too. In the picture of the house in the early days, these children are photographed standing on the porch.

A September 1908 note in the *Ravenna News* mentions a parody on the nursery rhyme "Mary Had A Little Lamb." Little Mary Simons did have a little lamb that followed her to school one day! The lamb got to the 2nd floor of the school before a schoolmate, Jack Cuddy intercepted it.

On October 15, 1909 Mr. Simon sold four lots on the north side of his block. The next year or shortly after, another large house was built at the north end by the same carpenter as who had built the Simon house, Joe Hach. The historic home is also still standing. It was called the Macek place for many years.

The July 13, 1913 edition of the *Ravenna News* carries an account of the Simons house being struck by a "dry" stroke of lightning that did not set fire to the house. The bolt struck on the west side of the roof, tearing off a strip of shingles possibly 6' long and 8 or 10" wide. A half dozen boards in the peak of the north gable were torn off, but damage to the house was reported as "very slight." This was a terrific electrical storm and also felled a huge catalpa tree at the Joe Clark residence. This tree was one of the largest and finest in northern Buffalo County and the only survivor of a dozen planted by Erastus Smith.

The Simons sold their house to Carlton B. Cass on November 26, 1913 and moved to Orland, California, but through the years Mr. Simon kept in contact with his friends in Ravenna. He became involved in the growing of rice in his new state. He died at his home in Orland September 15, 1929 and was buried in Orland. He was seventy-one.

Carlton B., known as C.B. Cass, and his wife, Theresa (Petrick) and their five children moved into the house in 1913. Later another son was born. All of the children eventually graduated from college, which was quite unusual for the times.

C.B. Cass was the founder of the *Ravenna News*. C.B. was born in Albany, N.Y. in 1868 and was seven years old when the family moved to Aurora, NE. His father, H.G., was editor of an Aurora newspaper. After high school C.B. apprenticed as a journeyman printer at the *Hamilton County News*. In 1886 he founded the *Ravenna Star*. A year later he took charge of the *Ravenna News*. C.B. was a mainstay in Ravenna in the early years.

On October 20, 1927 C.B. died at age 59 and left editorship to his oldest son, Allan. In 1929 Allan left Ravenna and his brother Lyman took over. Lyman continued as editor until 1971 when he sold the paper to Jack and Marilyn Spiegel. Lyman died in July 1995 and is buried at Highland Park. His wife, Josephine "Jo" died in 2000.

Lyman and Jo lived in the house with "Mother Cass" for a time after their marriage in 1933. Theresa continued to live in the house until her death on March 8 1962. Carlton and Theresa are buried in Ravenna's Highland Cemetery "old part" just west of the machine garage.

The house sat empty for a year until Linn and Clela Wyatt bought it in 1963 and moved in with their teenage daughter, Marilyn. The Wyatts took out the back stairway, removed the old steam heating system, removed some doorways and put in a modern kitchen.

On August 14, 1968 the Wyatts sold the house to Norm and Barb Schmidt and they moved in with their three children. Mr. Schmidt was an officer in the Ravenna Bank. The Schmidt's remodeled the attic to make one very large bedroom and a study area for the boys with desks on each end. They also installed a separate heating the cooling system for the area.

On October 26, 1979 the house was sold to the present owners, Don and Vicki (Reiter) Schmidt. Vicki a native of Ravenna, a 1968 graduate of Ravenna High School. Don grew up in the Poole area and graduated from RHS in 1962. The couple raised their three children in this house. Upon touring the home, Vicki commented that the woodwork is in amazingly good shape for the number of lively children who had lived here!

This beautiful house sits on a corner lot on main street, two blocks north of downtown Ravenna. The main entrance faces southwest. The outside structure has remained virtually unchanged since it was built. The only marked difference from the early photos is that now the house is surrounded by large maple and linden trees and the windows are not the double hung kind.

The oversized front door and oval glass window are original. The original porch and balcony pillars and railings were just replaced in spring 2000. The original pillars were hollow, constructed of wood strips sanded to make them round.

In the foyer sits a russet colored couch that resembles the "fainting couches" of the Victorian era, approximately 1837-1900. These couches got their name from the fact that women frequently fainted due to wearing tight corsets. It is estimated that this couch is approximately 1920 vintage. It has decorative wooden feet and folds out into a bed. It originally belonged to Don Schmidt's parents. It has been re-upholstered and stuffed.

Walking north from the foyer through a large doorway with original pocket doors, one enters a room that was probably called the parlor in the old days. These pocket doors that slide back into the walls were popular because before central heating rooms were often closed off in the winter. On the east wall is a large mirror that measures about 5' x 3'5". Vicki stated that many people who visit the house believe that his mirror was placed there to hide a former fireplace, but the mirror is original and was placed there by Mr. Simon for his daughter who took dance lessons. On each side of the mirror are thick white pillars that

are embedded in the wall. Above and below the mirror are white mantles for display of decorative items. Opposite the mirror, are large curved windows that look west across Grand Ave. where the old "white" school recently stood. This room would be very sunny in the afternoon.

To the right of the foyer one walks through more pocket doors into a large dining room with a large bay window that looks south. Elegant draperies hang to the floor. Along this wall sits an antique Singer sewing machine that belonged to Don's mother Frieda. In the center of the room sits a large dining table that also belonged to Don's parents. A unique oblong candleholder with seven candles burning was on the table when author visited. On the north wall sits what were originally two commercial jewelry cases. Norm Schmidt and neighbor, Jimmy Irwin, put a beautiful oak top on them and now they display figures while the inside is used for storage.

Don, who is a carpenter/contractor, recently remodeled the kitchen on the east. On the decorative oak shelves above the cupboards a ceramic lighted village is displayed. In a corner of the kitchen a built in-desk holds a computer. A cozy family room and bathroom are adjacent to the kitchen.

Access to basement and cellar is close to the back door on the east. The 1/2 basement is an L-shape and below that is a root cellar. Thus, there are five levels in this house.

Access to the second floor is gained by the stairway in the foyer by the main door. At the base of the stairs a large leaded glass window looks west. Swirled diamond shaped designs are evident in this. Above the landing on the stairway hangs the decorative framed marriage license of Don's grandparents, Amiel and Bertha Lammers, married in 1895.



**C.B. Cass**



**Joseph Simon**

On second floor there are three bedrooms, a balcony room and a full bath. The large master bedroom, done in blue, looks out to the south through very large curved windows. In the second bedroom on the northeast antique quilts are displayed. From the north window one can see another historic home at the end of the block.

The little balcony room on the southwest is probably most fascinating. It leads onto the large balcony on the south side. The little room that measures about 6' x 8" is used for a sewing room. One window looks west and one south. The two leaded glass windows were recently replaced. The original wallpaper in this room was also recently plastered over.

A large third floor room is accessed via pull down stairs. These are not for unagile people to navigate! A little dormer on the west with one window offers a view down Corinth Street. The peak of this dormer is topped with a spire. It is approximately 40' from the ground to the peak.

A few years ago Don made an interesting discovery while investigating for bees in the attic. Behind a partition he found a shoe box full of old letters and pictures! Upon examination they were determined to be letters written by C.B. Cass to his daughter, Marjorie. They were written after she went off to college, circa early 1930's. They were very interesting and historic letters as C.B. was a wonderful writer. The Schmidt's mailed them to Marjorie in California, who was delighted to get them. She later sent them to other family members, round robin style.

The attic is now used mostly for storage. There is a table, a toy train, a doll high chair, and other charming wooden toys Don made for his children.

The Schmidt's opened their beautiful home to the public for the 1998 Christmas walk. Between 125-150 toured the home.

In spring 2000 the new pillars and railings were completed on the house and the family can be seen sitting in white wicker furniture on the big wrap around porch. In summer 2001 Don built a redwood deck onto the back (east) side of the house. It is good to see this beautiful home being preserved as well as being lived in.

### SOURCES

The *Ravenna News*

Correspondence with Marjorie and Allan Cass.

Personal conversations with Vicki Schmidt.

Special thanks to Don and Vicki Schmidt for their hospitality and for providing information and pictures. The late Mrs. Albin Dusek originally gave Vicki two pictures of the house in the early days. The picture of C.B. Cass is from *History of Buffalo County, Volume 1*, written by Samuel C. Bassett in 1916.

Author took modern pictures of the house.



**The Cass House today.**

Photo by Valerie Vlerk

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Dr. Roger P. Davis, Editor

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**TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM**

The museum is now closed for the season. It is open only by appointment and will depend upon availability of guides. We will be having the Christmas Tree Walk from one to five p.m., each day from Dec. 1-9. Our theme is A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS, so plan to see many trees with creative decorations. I have heard much about them as many of the organizations started planning right after the trees were taken down last year and have had fun creating decorations all summer.

We had a good attendance this past summer and many things have happened. The depot has been painted on the outside, the gazebo is nearing completion, the entrance has been worked on and is nearing completion, the plaque with the names of the original land donors is yet to be completed. It's amazing how one thing calls for another and how much time it takes when you are also giving tours and so forth. There is never a dull moment at your historical museum.

If you would care to volunteer, please call and let us know what and how you can help.

We are all enjoying working with our new Society Director, Sherri Dux-Ideus.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

Buffalo County Historical Society

Box 523

Kearney, NE 68848-0523

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VIVIAN M BLOMEKAMP  
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